

NOTHING TO FEAR, BUT THE LACK OF FEAR

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

But the midwives feared G-d and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them, and they caused the boys to live. (Shemos 1:17)

In the midst of this storm-to-be, with a cast of thousands including the most famous characters on the stage of history, there is this seemingly miniscule sub-plot about two Jewish women who had defiantly stood up to the most powerful and murderous emperor of his time. They had been prepared to sacrifice themselves on the altar for fear of G-d, in order to save Jewish children from being killed at birth.

And, as the Torah relates:

It was because the midwives feared G-d that He made them houses. (Shemos 1:21)

MADE THEM HOUSES: Houses of kohanim, Leviim, and kings are called "houses." (Rashi)

In other words, as a reward for this heroic act of saving the Jewish male babies, the source of tribal lineage in the Jewish people, they were rewarded with descendants who would produce the most illustrious of those lineages.

What is interesting is the emphasis of the posuk, which does not focus on the fact that they saved the male babies as the reason for this reward, but rather on the fact that they FEARED G-D. Perhaps this is why the first posuk places their fear of G-d in advance of their act of self-sacrifice, as opposed to the other way around, which might have flowed better given the context:

But they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them, and they caused the boys to live, BECAUSE the midwives feared G-d.

In other words, what counted the most was not the saving of the babies, but the fear of G-d these women developed and maintained.

While this may seem a little strange at first, it actually makes sense given Moshe Rabbeinu's own farewell speech to the Jewish people:

Now, Israel, what does G-d, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear G-d, your G-d... (Devarim 10:12)

Really? That's it? Fear of G-d is but one of the 613 Mitzvos incumbent upon the Jewish nation; what

about the other 612 of them? That's the whole point Moshe Rabbeinu was teaching. Even though fear of G-d is included in the list of ALL the mitzvos, it is separate from the rest of them, and in a very real sense, all of the others are included in it.

This does not mean that by performing the mitzvah of fear of G-d only, that one is free from performing the rest of the mitzvos. First of all, there is no such tradition to that effect. But secondly, a person with fear of G-d would be compelled to perform the rest of the mitzvos, if only as an expression of their fear of G-d, just as the midwives HAD done to save the Jewish babies as an expression of their own fear of G-d.

In other words, Moshe Rabbeinu was telling the Jewish people, without fear of G-d, keeping the mitzvos will always be a burden, a "yoke" that you will want to throw off most of your lives. With fear of G-d, then performing the rest of the mitzvos will become the most natural thing for you, and maintaining a high level of integrity will become part-and-parcel of your own sense of self.

However, there is more to discuss regarding this all-important mitzvah, as we shall now see, b'ezras Hashem Yisborach. It will have a lot to say about the Egyptian exile, and the rest of Jewish history for that matter.

SHABBOS DAY:

Remember that which Amalek did to you on your way when you left Egypt, encountering you along the way and attacking the weak who straggled after you, while you were tired. He came after you and did not fear G-d. (Devarim 25:17-18)

Interestingly, in this posuk we have the reverse situation. Whereas with respect to the midwives, their fear of G-d was mentioned first, but should have been mentioned second; with respect to Amalek, it is just the reverse. It should have said:

He did not fear G-d, and came after you.

After all, what is more important, that he attacked the Jewish people, or that he did not fear G-d? Furthermore, should the posuk not have said:

He came after you BECAUSE he did not fear G-d?

From the posuk itself, it seems that the second clause is not the reason for the first one, but rather, an independent sin. It is as if to say that Amalek was guilty of two independent sins, the first being that "he attacked you," and the second one being that "he did not fear G-d." However, is not the second sin the basis of the first one?

Maybe not, when it comes to the nations of the world, as the following posuk regarding the abduction and release of Sarah Imeinu, seems to indicate:

Now Avimelech had not approached her; so he said, "My L-rd, will you slay a nation even though it is

righteous?" (Bereishis 20:4)

RIGHTEOUS? Even if Sarah had been Avraham's sister, as he had told the Philistines of that time, had she consented to be taken to Avimelech to become a wife for him? Had Avraham, her "brother" agreed to the forced marriage?

Furthermore, when later confronted by Avimelech, to whom G-d had appeared in a dream to warn him to stay away from Sarah, and asked why he had hid the real truth from Avimelech, Avraham explained:

"Because I said, 'There is but no fear of G-d in this place and they will slay me because of my wife.'"
(Bereishis 20:11)

Now, if Avraham had been paranoid, then Avimelech's self-indignation might have been justified. However, if Avraham had acted prudently because he had properly assessed the situation, then how could Avimelech even apply the term "righteous" to himself and his people? And, how could G-d say:

"I, too, knew that it was in the innocence of your heart that you did this..." (Bereishis 20:6)

Why didn't G-d just tell him, "What are you talking about, O evil one?! You stole that woman to satisfy your own desires, and you deserve everything you have coming to you!"

What does Rashi say?

THERE IS BUT NO FEAR OF G-D: When a stranger arrives in a city, do people ask him about what he would like to eat or to drink, or do they ask him about his wife - "Is this your wife?" or "Is this your sister?" (Rashi, Bereishis 20:11)

In other words, Rashi is saying that Avraham reproved Avimelech by saying, "If they are going to ask about anything at all, it should be about his needs. If they ask about his relationship to the woman accompanying him, then it is evidence that they are not G-d-fearing people!"

Interesting definition of fear of G-d that Rashi has provided here. According to this, one's ability to put the needs of others above their own personal needs is a function of a person's fear of G-d, it seems according to Rashi. This would, perhaps, explain the posuk with which we began:

But the midwives feared G-d and they did not do as the king of Egypt spoke to them, and they caused the boys to live. (Shemos 1:17)

In other words, it was not that the midwives defied Pharaoh, and therefore saved the children. Rather, the midwives feared G-d, and therefore cared for the children more than for themselves, which prompted them to save them from being killed. It happened to be that in the process, they defied Pharaoh and risked their lives.

What's the difference in the end?

SEUDOS SHILSHIS:

Now, Israel, what does G-d, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear G-d, your G-d... (Devarim 10:12)

Rebi Chanina said: All is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven, as it says, "Now, Israel, what does G-d, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear . . ." (Devarim 10:12) . . . Rebi Chanina said in the name of Rebi Shimon bar Yochai: The Holy One, Blessed is He, only has fear of G-d stored away in His storehouse, as it says, "Fear of G-d is His storehouse" (Yeshayahu 33:6) . . . (Brochos 33b)

ALL IS IN THE HANDS OF HEAVEN: All that comes to a person is in the hands of The Holy One, Blessed is He. For example, whether he will be tall or short, poor or rich, wise or foolish, light or dark - all of that is determined by Heaven. However, whether he will be righteous or evil is NOT in the hands of Heavens, but in the hands of man; two paths are placed before him, and he has to choose fear of G-d for himself. (Rashi)

In other words, the "givens" in life are beyond us. What we mean by "givens" are those things that exist, either in us, in other people, or in the situation around us, regardless of our will and desire. They are the "things" that we are "forced" to work with in trying to accomplish our will. They are, in effect, the pre-designed "stage" upon which we find ourselves acting out our lives. Heaven's question is, "How will you respond to all of it?"

A famous writer once said, "All of life is a stage." It was a good observation. He envisioned life as being a "set-up," almost a "hoax," though we human beings tend to look at it as if it is just one random, meandering, flow of time. What he didn't realize was Who "built" the stage, and why He did.

To help us figure out the answer, Moshe left us with some very insightful parting words:

Now, Israel, what does G-d, your G-d, ask of you? Only to fear G-d, your G-d... (Devarim 10:12)

In other words, Moshe Rabbeinu was telling us, or rather warning us: Don't be fooled by the stage or the characters around you. Don't imbue the givens of life with independent power, as if they are self-governing and can function independent of G-d Who made them.

For, Rebi Chanina said: A person does not injure his finger [in the world] below, unless it is decreed Above. (Chullin 7a)

In other words, that unbelievably, phenomenally complex and ever-changing world you see around you, with a cast of billions and trillions, if you include the rest of history - is all just a stage upon which you must act out your life, in the process, to come to fear G-d. What we call "circumstance," which includes the other 612 mitzvos we have been commanded to observe when possible, exists just to allow us to learn fear of G-d from them, and to exhibit our own fear of G-d through them.

Whatever else happens, the midwives understood, was a function of Divine Providence, and most important of all, **BEYOND THEIR CONTROL.**

MELAVE MALKAH:

Yisroel their father said to them, "If it must be so, then do this..." (Bereishis 43:11)

In the story of Yosef's 22-year exile away from home, and all that occurred until the time of his re-union with his father, this posuk represents one of the most dramatic moments.

Until this point, Ya'akov had suffered the violation of his daughter in Shechem, the usurping of his authority by his sons, Shimon and Levi, when they wiped out the town of Shechem in revenge, the selling of Yosef, the imprisonment of Shimon in Egypt, and who knows what else that is not recorded in the Torah. Now, as the famine wore on and depleted their supplies, he would have to endure sending his second favorite son, Binyomin, down to Egypt and into the "lion's den."

Many a person might have simply cracked under the weight of so much "bad luck," especially when things had started out so brightly, and expectations had been so high. However, Ya'akov Avinu - now referred to by his ultimate name, "Yisroel" - instead took up the challenge, and acted the best way he could, given the "givens" in his life.

As a result, he turned the situation around, and though it still got somewhat worst for the brothers (his sons), for Yisroel, the situation just kept improving until his dreams of reunion with Yosef were fulfilled. And thus, as Yosef embraced his father and cried on his neck in joy, Ya'akov, instead, recited "Krias Shema" and proclaimed G-d's unity. (Rashi, Bereishis 46:29)

That is, Yisroel proclaimed that all that he had gone through had been engineered by G-d, for his benefit, to test his fear of G-d. The final test of his resolve came at the super-dramatic moment of the actual encounter with Yosef, and at that moment in time he looked right past Yosef and saw G-d instead, and thus said the Shema.

This is what it means to be a true "Yisroel," and a true "B'nei Yisroel." And, this was what the Jewish people went down to Egypt to accomplish, and what every exile has been meant to achieve until this very day.

Have a great Shabbos,
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